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AUTHOR Horn, John D.
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ABSTRACT

This handbook offers observations from the superintendent's viewpoint about the evaluation responsibilities of school board members and school boards. The handbook describes important features of the evaluation role of school boards and offers a detailed description of what the board should evaluate within the context of the districts--who the board should evaluate and which aspect of school operations it should assess. It is argued that boards should be responsible for focusing on the following areas: mission and priorities; values, beliefs, and philosophies; curriculum; planning and continuous improvement initiatives; relationships among system components; policy development and review; and support systems. The handbook asserts that the focus of evaluation roles is more on raising the right questions than on promoting answers. In general, boards should pay more evaluative attention to those aspects of school governance that hold more promise for long-term improvements. (Contains 13 references.) (LMI)

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THE EVALUATION ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS.

A SUPERINTENDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

John D. Herr

Mesaquite Independent School District



Center for Research on
Educational Accountability and Teacher Evaluation
The Evaluation Center

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-5178

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by

John D. Horn
Mesquite Independent School District

January 1996

CREATE, The Evaluation Center, WMU, 401B Ellsworth Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5178 (616) 387-5895; Fax (616) 387-5923; Internet, E-mail, CREATE INFO@WMICH.EDU

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Some are new, some are old, and some are borrowed and adapted, but the following observations and questions about the evaluation responsibilities of school board members and school boards are intended to stimulate further thoughtful inquiry and more reflective practice.

Observations about the evaluation role of school boards, as viewed through the eyes of the superintendent, offer a perspective that is unique in many respects. The superintendency is the primary function in school districts that bridges the school boards to staff and students and is, at the same time, a part of both of those worlds. This vantage point provides the opportunity to develop pertinent insights useful in suggesting some questions and ideas worthy of serious thought for other practitioners in improving the governance and administration of the schools.

Definitions

What is meant by the terms "evaluation" and "role?" Evaluation implies a need to make a judgment about something or someone in terms of a standard or expectation. In most instances an evaluation is based on a series of impressions. Being called on to make value judgments is one of the more important roles of public school board members, and one of the most misunderstood and neglected.

Role means the character of what one does. It is sometimes confused with function. Function refers to the actions one takes. As an example, the character (role) of what the school bus driver does is transportation, while what the driver does (function) is get the kids to and from school. When a school board is choosing among competing options in order to establish five priorities for the year, the board is engaging in an evaluation role. The action to actually set the priorities is a function.

Because these terms are so closely related, they are sometimes used interchangeably, but technically they are quite different. Nevertheless, in this document we will use the term role to refer to role *and* function or role *and* responsibility.

The Value of Questions

The focus here will be more on suggesting questions to address rather than on answers to apply. The reason for this focus on questions is twofold. First, we do not claim to have the answers. Second, rather than describing solutions that other districts could duplicate, a better practice is more likely to result from board members and superintendents who reflect on questions raised to formulate or extend their own inquiries specific to their situations. However, the focus on questions does not preclude several recommendations, opinions, and statements of principle or belief that are respectfully offered for contemplation.

Physicist Richard Feynman, the late Nobel Peace Prize winner for his work on the Manhattan project, placed a higher value on questions than on answers (Feynman, 1985). He attributed his love for questions and the use of questioning as a means of learning to his mother. He said that his mother would ask him when he came home from school each day, "Richard, what *good questions did you ask* in school today?" It frustrated him at the time because the mothers of his friends usually asked them *what they had learned* in school that day (Feynman, 1985). Eventually, he saw the wisdom of her query. Dr. W. Edwards Deming agreed by saying that there is no learning without questions (*Total Quality Transformation*, 1995).

Asking good questions is seldom easy and requires considerable mental energy. It is ironic how quickly solutions and new options seem to appear when we concentrate on framing relevant

questions. Asking questions can enhance one's own understanding as well as those of others, and when accompanied by active listening, can facilitate communication.

The question enablers of *who, what, when, where, and how* structure the work of journalists. Like the historian, *why* has been added to that list and to selected topics in the form of questions to structure the content that follows. It is hoped that this format will make reading easy and, in addition to clarifying the role of school boards in evaluation, that the questions posed will stimulate further inquiry, informed discussion, more systems thinking, and a greater teamwork approach to problem solving. Most of all, hopefully better practices in their evaluation roles will result among boards and superintendents.

The Evaluation Role: The Major Role Among Many

The roles of school boards may be defined with various captions, but the most common roles in addition to evaluation are general supervision and monitoring, goal setting, policy-making, judging, planning, leading and championing education, and carrying out statutory duties. All of the roles are interrelated and at times overlapping, but the role that transcends and permeates all others is evaluation. The good and bad defining moments for most boards are derived from how well they handle their evaluation role.

Why Should School Boards Play a Role in Evaluation?

The first charge to school boards encompasses not only the responsibility for governing the schools in a way that the primary mission of the schools is accomplished, but that processes are in place that will make the schools better. How could a school board know whether or not the purpose of the schools is being achieved or even if there is progress toward that purpose without evaluation?

Is it possible that the board that ensures that effective processes for continuous improvement are in place will automatically take care of the accountability aspect of their governance responsibility?

In a rudimentary way, most board members were engaged in an evaluation role as candidates and more often than not, the candidates believe that they have something to offer in a way that will improve the schools. The individual candidate's opinion may be narrowly focused and based on perception and impression only, but the key implication is that a desire for improvement is the motivating force at work. Even those candidates who run with hidden agendas or an "ax to grind" probably believe that if the changes they seek were made, their schools would be improved.

So, should school improvement be the most important result of the evaluation role of the school board? Should improvement be the primary goal of all evaluation activities?

Larry Lezotte, in describing the underlying principles supporting the effective school correlates, asserts that there are only two kinds of schools: Improving Schools and Declining Schools (Lezotte, 1987). This assertion implies that maintenance of the status quo may not be possible in schools. The same inference is made by Deming's philosophy about quality in business. He ascribes to the belief that continuous improvement of systems is the lifeblood of not just success, but sheer survival of the business enterprise (*Total Quality Transformation*, 1995).

It is herein proposed that continuous improvement should be the higher purpose of most evaluation tasks. With that higher purpose in mind, it could be useful to describe some of the more important features of the evaluation role of school boards before discussing the basic components of those matters with which board members should be involved in an evaluation role.

What are the Distinguishing Characteristics
of the Effective School Board's Role in Evaluation?

First, is evaluation a discrete event or task separate from all other functions, or rather a process activity that should pervade nearly all other board roles, functions, and actions? Any time the board decides to "take a look at whatever" it is engaging in an evaluation activity. Even how the board decides *what* needs to be examined is a part of the evaluation process. If improvement is not the reason for this chosen closer look, then the issue of *why* needs to be answered by the board before the task is started.

Planning cycles used by school districts normally contain an evaluation section or step in the process. In a formal, organized way, evaluation is a check point on the planning model schematic, but in effective practice numerous minievaluation cycles are contained within the overarching cycle and are going on simultaneously. In Deming's "PLAN-DO-STUDY-ACT" cycle (*Total Quality Transformation*, 1995), an evaluation component is contained in both the planning and study phases. The indication is that evaluation is an occasional event but, more importantly, that evaluation permeates many other functions as well.

An effective board makes a distinction between evaluation of a board activity and what it directs or causes to be evaluated. This is where the "rubber meets the road," and if not clearly understood by all players, conflict and confusion result, causing lines of accountability and improvement initiatives to be stymied. This condition is what happens when the board involves itself directly in staff responsibilities and is equally descriptive of the situation when the staff usurps the authority of the board.

Since teaching and learning should be at the center of attention in schools, should the board itself evaluate teachers or adopt policies that specifically impose this duty on others? Should the board evaluate the progress of individual students? Should the board directly evaluate the effectiveness of the reading program in the primary grades? The successful board has a clear understanding of what it should evaluate itself and what it should direct to be evaluated by others. The successful board then maintains consistency in the practice of making that distinction.

The board's actions to define its evaluation role are characterized by a series of consciously determined distinctions that it must make. At a minimum, those distinctions include the following:

1. The board clearly defines what it will evaluate itself as opposed to what it will direct to be evaluated by others.
2. The board clearly defines the ends/results it expects.
3. The board communicates clearly that it will not specify the means to achieve the desired results, but that it will evaluate all means and processes used to ensure that they are legal, reasonable, research based (but not necessarily research proven), and that they are ethical (Poston, 1994). The effectiveness of processes will be determined by the results produced.
4. The board communicates clearly that it must have a system to enable it to ascertain whether or not school, department, and division goals are aligned with the overall mission and goals of the district.
5. The board clearly articulates the values, beliefs, and philosophies by which it will function, as well as those by which it expects the system to function.

6. The board continuously demonstrates that it will be an active partner in developing and participating in the planning processes that result in establishment or revisions to mission, vision, goals, and priorities.
7. The board models its belief in the efficacy of the district's commitment to continuous improvement. The board demonstrates its support for the staff as the staff utilizes the various tools available to improve all processes. Are improvement processes a way of life in the district? The board does not determine if these processes are good or bad, but determines if any of these processes are in place and are in fact being utilized.

Now that some of the major distinctions an effective board makes in addressing its evaluation role have been established, what follows is more detailed descriptions of what the board should evaluate within the context of these seven distinctions. The first areas addressed are those that seem to cause great difficulty for many school boards.

Who Should the Board Evaluate?

Contrary to "street wisdom," the list of persons the board itself should evaluate is rather short. The board should evaluate only those who report directly to it. At a minimum, this would include the superintendent and in some cases the school attorney, independent auditors, or other consultants. So what is the board's role in evaluating other employees? If the board deems it important that an evaluation or appraisal system for employees be utilized, then through its policy-making powers it would specify the purpose of such a system and give just enough direction to ensure that the values, beliefs, and philosophies of the board are reflected in the policy. Required reports should allow the

board to determine if the policies and the processes selected to implement the personnel evaluation policies are effective in terms of attaining the purposes specified.

In addition to evaluating the superintendent, it is incumbent on the board to evaluate itself, particularly if the board is to model the principles of continuous improvement and set an example for what it expects in other personnel evaluations (McGee, 1990). While it may be argued that the voters ultimately evaluate board members on election day, in ordinary circumstances voters are more likely to reelect board members who can show that the schools in the district are improving and that the board is involved in continuous improvements in how successfully it functions as well.

What are Some of the Major Aspects of School Operations that the Board Should Evaluate?

Unlike the short list of who is evaluated by the board, this list of other aspects of school operations can be very extensive and the various elements can be grouped in many different ways. Some of the categories chosen here may need some definition, but the terms used here are quite generic to schools. Seven of the more critical categories are listed below:

1. Mission, purpose, goals, and priorities
2. Values, beliefs, philosophies
3. What is to be taught/learned
4. Planning, continuous improvement initiatives
5. Relationships and connections
6. Policy development
7. Support systems

At first glance it may appear that several items on which typical boards spend a great deal of time are missing. Some of the more obvious would include matters pertaining to the following: contracts, teacher recruitment and retention, certification, employee appointments, promotion, job descriptions, staffing ratios, salary schedules, facilities management, budgets, taxes, business practices, school finance, discipline management, grievance procedures, community relations, information systems, transportation, food service, staff development, technology, research, diversity issues, student activities, general and school administration, special populations, safety, working conditions, insurance, textbooks, state and federal mandates, legal services, collective bargaining, employee morale, homework, student retention and promotion, testing, graduation requirements, instructional arrangements, calendars, class schedules, etc.

With a little imagination, one could classify any item in this enumeration into one of the seven areas identified above. However, the sheer magnitude of this list, which is suggestive only and not exhaustive, is indicative of the multiple and almost impossible challenges facing school boards. They cannot be involved in everything, nor should they be involved in just the particular interests of individual members. The magnitude of this list also is strong evidence that, for boards to be effective, they must be selective about that to which they give their attention. The more boards become involved in detail, the greater the likelihood of unintended micro-management, conflict, and the unfortunate effect of debilitating neglect of the things that really matter most for the long term.

What follows is a brief description of the meaning of each of the seven categories, along with a facet or two of each category as examples of appropriate evaluation roles for school boards. It is not the intent of this review to create a complete list of items in which the board should and should not have an evaluation role. Though each item is important and the order of importance certainly can

be debated, they have been placed in priority under the assumption that the further down the list the board goes to spend most of its evaluation time, the more diminished its impact on improvement for the long run. Perhaps one of the reasons that school governance has become such a big issue in the movement to restructure schools is the neglect by boards and superintendents of the more important roles and responsibilities implied in this list.

1. Mission, Goals, Priorities

What is the primary purpose of the public school? The Three R's remain a central focus in the mission statements of many school districts and in the perception of the general public. Success in accomplishing this academic mission is also the main measure by which schools are judged. Emanating from the common schools of the nineteenth century was a clear expectation about moral and ethical development of students as a companion to the academic development so that students would become good citizens. In addition, the schools have been assigned a custodial function as all superintendents are reminded when schools have to be shut down due to weather or some other emergency. Fourth, the sorting and selecting function is not as readily apparent as often expressed, but nevertheless an important assignment as well. The increasing commitment to "all children" still faces many hurdles as the equity and adequacy debates indicate. Until recent times, schools were judged more by the achievement of their college-bound students than the learning levels of all students. The high school is not only the gateway to college, but the filter for determining eligibility for particular colleges or universities. Finally, the schools have been assigned many social service functions, such as health, transportation, cafeteria service, crime prevention, and the means for implementing several social policy purposes, such as societal integration.

The responsibilities of the public schools have grown steadily, and most of these additional obligations have not been the result of local school board actions but duties assigned by federal and state governments as well as the courts. In this context then, where is the opportunity for a local board to have some say about mission and goals? The opportunity lies in the emphasis in words and deeds about what is the most important, and in as much prevention of interference with the primary mission as possible. Constant vigilance on matters of mission and purpose is the one area where the board's evaluation role should be the most visible.

2. Values, Beliefs, Philosophies, Assumptions

How does what we consider important influence our decisions or actions (*Leadership Development Process-Level II*, 1989)? How could our belief about what motivates teachers, for example, dictate the specifics of a policy we might develop on salary and benefits? In what way could one's thinking about whether or not it is right to tax the property of the person who has no children to educate the children of the person who has no property be a factor in decisions on taxation? Since we can really never know all we need to know about problems to which we must find solutions, how often do we take time to reflect on the assumptions we are making before making a decision? How could a board benefit from some discussions on all of these areas?

Values, beliefs, philosophies, and assumptions might be referred to as the real issues of mind and heart (Bamberger, 1991). The problem is that men and women all have values, beliefs, etc., but rarely verbalize them, much less write them down or think about how they influence their decisions. John Carver, in his book about nonprofit boards and their leadership roles said it well:

"The essence of any organization lies in what it believes, what it stands for, and what and how it values. An organization's works, rather than its words, are the telling assessment of its beliefs (Carver, 1991)."

The most important forces at work in any organization are these intangibles that exist in minds and hearts. The frightening thing is that traditionally neither school leaders nor school boards have given them much attention. How can a board fulfill its obligations and either ignore or do little to cultivate the culture and belief system of its employees? On the other hand, if given proper attention, conscious work in this domain could hold tremendous promise for major improvements.

3. What is to be Taught and Learned?

What is to be *taught* is titled "curriculum" with the expectation that it is what is *learned*. Teaching and teaching strategies are referred to as "instruction." *How* it is to be taught (process) is the prerogative left to the professional staff (as long as the processes are legal, research based, reasonable, and ethical), but *what* is to be taught is predominantly the domain of the board and the community that elects them. Except for "hot topics" or objectionable books or crusades for particular programs, boards generally spend little time on curriculum matters.

As simple as it sounds, it has not been clearly articulated what it is exactly that all high school graduates should know and understand, be able to do, or appreciate. There may be a common understanding and consensus about some of the knowledge or skills, but not the level or degree. So it is understandable that some boards consider work on the curriculum to be quite daunting. Nevertheless, it is a responsibility of the board, in concert with the community

and the professionals, to evaluate what is being taught or expected to be learned. One action for a board to take would be to direct a special team to conduct a curriculum audit. Properly done, a clearer vision of goals and expectations could emerge.

4. Planning and Continuous Improvement Initiatives

How effective are the planning processes in most school districts, and are they comprehensive in scope? Are the processes used inclusive and broadly representative? Are the products of planning placed on a shelf and promptly forgotten? Or, are publications reflecting the goals and actions resulting from the planning activities tattered and torn from daily use?

Planning and improvement have been placed in the same category for several reasons. One, it is believed that improvement should be the goal of all planning and that sustained improvement is the result of intelligent, planned action. (This is an example of how one's beliefs influence decisions.) Secondly, the concern about the real or perceived decline in the quality of America's public schools and the accompanying debate continues to be front page news, providing opportunities for school leaders to capitalize on the attention. "Strategic planning" and development and application of "quality principles" in the major thrusts for school improvement integrate the two.

Most of the major school improvement initiatives (*Total Quality Transformation*, 1995) of this decade have common threads of beliefs, principles, quality, and effective planning embedded in them. This statement is true for

Edmond and Lezotte's Effective Schools

Levin's Accelerated Schools

Glickman's Professional Schools

Sizer's Essential Schools

Comer's Developmental Schools

Champlin's Outcomes-Driven Schools

Schlechty's Twenty-First Century Schools

Deming's Fourteen Points

Cook's Strategic Planning

Continuous improvement has to become a way of life in our public schools if we are to accomplish our mission. It is not a matter of teachers and school employees working harder, but more a matter of working more interdependently and consistently applying what we know works. It is a responsibility of the board to participate in and evaluate the planning and improvement activities in the district. This does not mean that the board is necessarily to dictate either the form or the content of planning, but it is a legitimate role of the board, if not an obligation, to ask often about improvement plans. Of course, the board must in turn look at its own planning for improving the way it functions.

5. Relationships and Connections

If the school district is viewed as a system or connected set of numerous subsystems, hopefully working in unison toward a common end, then is it not important to examine how each of the components relate to one another? We have designated relationships and connections as a category, because any effective evaluation effort must first see the whole before parts are examined. Trying to "fix" a part, as many boards and state legislatures are

prone to do, usually is counterproductive, because no effort is made to first understand how the part fits into the larger system and how it relates to the other parts.

The relationships that must be nurtured and the human dimension that requires leadership include at least the following:

1. Ends and goals and their attainability
2. Students and employees and their knowledge, capabilities, experiences, commitment, and energy
3. Processes and their appropriateness and quality
4. Responsibility and authority, their balance and distribution
5. Resources and their accessibility
6. Time and its division
7. Tools and their usefulness and dependability
8. Legal and ethical requirements, their empowerment and restraints
9. Community expectations and their historical contexts
10. Unintended and unanticipated occurrences, their causes and effects

Obviously there is not space in this treatise to explore each of these ten factors and how they interrelate, but listing them in this way reflects both the importance and complexity of keeping everyone and everything working in unison at the same time toward the same end. Thinking more in terms of inputs-processes-outputs must be done. It should be remembered that the products or services of one dimension become the input for another.

These ten factors have been listed in order of priority for attention. In some ways the people should be first, but people means everyone, including the public and students. They have been placed second only to the mission and goals. But once the purposes and goals are clear, the human dimension is what must have the most attention, and it contains a multifaceted malaise of relationships and connections. It is interesting to note that in many situations relationships have been thought of as being in opposition to each other rather than as teams cooperating, i.e., community vs. board, board vs. administration, administration vs. teachers, teachers vs. students, employee organizations vs. the public interest, etc.

All relationships are important, but the one relationship that requires constant attention is the partnership between the board and the superintendent. Volumes have been written about this relationship, but how the board fulfills its role in evaluating superintendent performance may do more to define the board's opportunity for success in this relationship than any other one board activity.

6. Policy Development and Review

What is the greatest use of policies--to enable, restrict, direct, control, require, standardize, clarify? Other than modeling, the power of policy-making is the most effective vehicle for board leadership. It is through its policies, which are the real-world expression of its governance role, that boards cause the organization to be led and managed toward specified ends in ways that reflect the beliefs and values the board deems important.

The trap that some boards get into is trying to describe every little detail of how it wants a policy implemented, leaving little latitude for the faculties and administrative teams to develop guidelines for daily operations. The more attention that boards pay to ends, beliefs, and

values, the less detail policies will need. Obviously, some policies will deal with processes and not just ends, and when they do, the board should involve the staff and those affected by the policy in its development. The policy should focus more on *what* the board wants done rather than *how*.

The general supervision responsibility of the board naturally requires some system of reporting that allows the board to determine whether or not the policies are being followed. But the more important duty of the board is to ensure that each policy is accomplishing its intended purpose. As an example, suppose the board adopts a policy that states that the class size limit in self-contained classes in the primary grades shall not exceed 25 students. It would be simple for the board to require snapshot reports of actual enrollment and hence fulfill its monitoring role for ensuring that the policy is being followed. However, the evaluation role, which is to determine whether or not the goals, purposes, or reasons why the policy was adopted are being achieved, is a much more complicated task. The board can require the staff to provide the data and information necessary for it to make an evaluation.

Aside from state requirements, most proposals for new policies or revision of policies originate from within the board itself, the administrative team, employee organizations, community groups, or other community agencies. Sometimes boards are presented with proposals that if adopted would diffuse a temporary political conflict but be detrimental to the long-term mission and goals or violate the beliefs and values. One way to prevent policies from being enacted in a reactive environment is to ensure that a policy review process is in place. However, the same process enhances the possibility of productive change and fosters innovation if it contains the right components and is properly aligned and managed.

To assist the board in performing its policy evaluation responsibility, it is suggested that guidelines on policy development and revision be developed that meet the following criteria:

1. The process is well defined and each step is clearly described.
2. The purpose or what is to be accomplished by the policy is clearly stated.
3. The process provides for input from staff and the public.
4. The process identifies critical decision points with alternate routes to final review.
5. The process provides for adequate time for reflection and analysis.
6. The proposed policy reflects or affirms the fundamental values and beliefs of the system.
7. The potential impact on the whole system, including budgets, is assessed in a way that unintended negative results are minimized.

7. Support Systems

Everything that a board does and all the activities of others in the system should support instructional settings and programs in some way. The only reason that anything else in the system can be justified is to optimize what happens when and where teachers and students are together.

The value of the support systems might be a parallel to an ocean liner. All those things below the waterline are things that are essential but not visible. Most of what makes it possible for the vessel to move steadily toward the destination in acceptable ways are out of sight. Such are the support systems in a school district. They include a long list of major functions like budget, finance, personnel practices, administration and, yes, board functions such as policy-

making. Another sobering parallel to the ship metaphor is how much orchestration it takes for all systems to work together and how much energy it takes to make the ship change direction. But even more stressful is the thought of what a small amount of effort it takes to cripple the ship or cause major damage to prop or rudder!

How well the board can comply with its evaluation role relating to support systems is not unlike how it fills that role in all other areas. It must require that reliable and relevant data and information be collected and then organized in a systematic way so that appropriate reports can be produced for the board to analyze and evaluate.

Summary

The role of the school board in evaluation is played out in three arenas. One dimension is the continuous evaluative thoughts and analyses that should be operative in all board discussions and decisions. A second dimension is when the board specifically and consciously engages in an explicit evaluation activity such as appraising the work of the superintendent. Another dimension is when the board directs that evaluations be done by others.

Effective boards make many distinctions in their evaluation roles, such as clearly defining what they will evaluate themselves. Effective boards also understand delegation and the necessity of evaluation by the staff, with subsequent communication back to the board as a whole. Among many other distinctions is the difference in its evaluation role for establishing purposes and goals in contrast with how it evaluates means or processes. A commitment to continuous improvement is modeled by the board as the primary reason for all evaluation activities.

It is proposed that boards have evaluation roles in seven groupings of school functions that include mission, values, curriculum, planning for improvement, relationships, policies, and support systems. The qualities of these evaluation roles with respect to each category vary somewhat, but they have more common characteristics than differences.

The focus of evaluation roles is more on raising the right questions than on promotion of answers. It is believed that, in general, boards should pay more evaluative attention to those aspects of school governance that hold more promise for long-term improvements. An example is the benefits that result from a board's continuous evaluation of the relevance of goals and priorities, and the alignment of all policies and improvement processes with those goals and the agreed-on values and beliefs.

Boards that expand on and extend the questions and observations made in this paper, and act accordingly, are more likely to be the boards that will see the greatest positive changes and improvements in the performance of employees and the accomplishments of their students.

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About the author-

John D. Horn, Ed.D., is superintendent of the Mesquite Independent School District, a position in which he has served for ten years. Mesquite is a fast-growing suburban community in Dallas County, Texas. Prior superintendent experience includes eight years in Allen, Texas. He has served as a classroom teacher, elementary principal, and administrative assistant to the superintendent.

- Past-President of the Texas Association of School Administrators
- Selected as the Texas Superintendent of the Year for 1995 in the AASA program
- Board Chairman of the Texas Leadership Center
- Executive Committee Board member-The Texas Center for Educational Research
- Committee Member-Special Task Force on School Governance, Texas Association of School Boards, 1993
- Received bachelor's and master's degrees from East Texas State University, doctorate degree from the University of North Texas.